

James E. and Flora Neff Spence House
312 Coleridge Avenue
Llyswn Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5888

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JAMES E. AND FLORA NEFF SPENCE HOUSE

HABS No. PA-5888

Location: 312 Coleridge Avenue

Date of Erection: 1907

Description: Except for the front porch's new concrete foundation, the exterior of this house is virtually unchanged since it was finished in 1907. The two-and-a-half-story, wood-frame structure has a steep, cross-gable roof with modillions at the cornice, and a three-story round tower at the northeast corner with a bell-shaped roof and turned finial. The first story has a veneer of yellow brick outlined by a wide, plain frieze at the cornice line; the second and attic stories are shingled, with contrast banding across the tops of the windows. The wide, balustraded front porch has round columns constructed like barrels, with curved wood slats held together by bands. These rest on limestone caps atop square brick piers, with a simple wood porch rail between. The front door and first-floor windows have segmental brick arches. Interior woodwork is especially rich downstairs, where the living room and entry/stairhall are separated by a colonnade.

History: Sometime after May 1903, when construction began on a new paper mill in Williamsburg, Pennsylvania, Patrick W. Finn, building contractor for the mill, sent for James E. Spence, an electrician who had worked for him in New York. Finn hired Spence to supervise the wiring of the mill, which was being financed by Williamsburg native Charles Schwab, president of United States Steel Company. In Williamsburg, Spence met and married Flora Neff. By March 1907 they had settled in Altoona and purchased this lot at the corner of Coleridge Avenue and Halleck Place, next door to the new home of James B. Finn, probably Patrick's brother or son. Spence and James Finn were partners in an electrical-contracting firm, with offices in Altoona and Hollidaysburg. Spence drew the plans for this house himself, with Flora's considerable influence. She wanted the main rooms downstairs to look just like those she admired in the Finn's house next door, down to the same millwork. Spence was also his own general contractor for the house's construction, which was completed in 1907. Three years later, he transferred the property to his wife's name, probably to protect their home from the economic repercussions of Patrick Finn's impending bankruptcy--a prudent move, in that Spence's business interests were closely bound to those of the Finns. In 1974 widow Flora Neff Spence sold the house to its present owners.

Sources: Maps: 1901, 1920, 1932, 1951. City directories. Tax records. Deed books: 173/478, 174/532, 174/534, 185/100, 233/554, 197/540, 964/944. Interview: James E. Spence, Jr., 314 Coleridge Ave., July 18, 1989.

Project Information: This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of Llyswen (HABS No. PA-5787) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Kathy Edwards in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian, and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Edwards's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.